



Policy Committee Meeting  
February 10, 2005

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## The Truth about Boomers' Differences from Previous Generations of Aging People

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*Each morning when I stand before my mirror, I see  
more and more of my mother.*

– Vicki T., 57-year-old boomer

A silent revolution is spreading across the planet. We can't stop it; we can only adapt to it.

The Oxford Dictionary defines “revolution” as “a dramatic and far-reaching change.” In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, laborsaving machines came along and generated “dramatic and far-reaching change.” This is why we call that event “the Industrial Revolution.” Nearly two centuries later, computer technology generated another wave of dramatic and far-reaching change in spawning the Information Revolution.

Now, another world-changing revolution is upon us. It is unlike any we have ever experienced. Future historians may call it The Great Demographic Revolution of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Dramatic and far-reaching demographic developments are reshaping the economic, social, cultural and political landscapes of the world. Nothing in the past is adequate to fully understand and solve many of the challenges these developments are creating.

Of all these developments, the *aging of society* gets the most attention. But developments on the other end of the age spectrum deserve just as much attention.

For example, to ignore population *implosion* in younger age groups when assessing the long-term viability of entitlement programs for seniors results in a flawed picture of the growing aging population's impact on the nation. In fact, most of the percentage increase in the number of seniors comes not from longevity gains but from birthrate losses.

Since 1974, the number of babies born annually has been too small to replace the population. This “birth dearth” has made younger age groups a smaller percentage of the total population. This is the main reason older people have become a larger and growing percentage of the population.

Over time, the birth dearth has led to a narrowing of the ratio of working taxpayers to retirees – a growing concern of public policy makers. And the shrunken populations in younger age groups have slowed or stopped sales growth in numerous product lines – a growing concern of business.

The “birth dearth” underlies Social Security’s trustees’ projection that economic growth in 2015 will be a trifling 1.8% and even lower in future decades. Thus, we face a weaker economy than we’ve had over the past 100 years. This compounds economic problems that national, state and local governments will face, as revenue needs to fund growing entitlement payouts to seniors grow faster than revenues collected.

So, in summary of these opening observations, we face a set of challenges never before encountered in human history: population implosion in younger age groups simultaneously occurring with population explosion in older age groups.

As we work through the challenges that this simultaneity of events poses, we should keep in mind that all other developed nations are experiencing the same thing – only in more dramatic and far-reaching terms that could have adverse effects on our own economy.

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I will focus the remainder of my comments on the focal point of America’s growing interest in aging issues – *boomers*.

**How aging boomers will influence the way we view aging.**

As a 72-year-old member of the Silent Generation – so-called because we supposedly did little to change the world – I am tired of hearing how different boomers are – as though they represent a new branch of the *homo sapiens* line.

It's time to give more attention to how boomers are like people in previous generations at comparable ages. Boomers' basic needs are no different from those of their parents and their parents before them. Erik Erikson's model of human development did not allow for boomers developing with different needs. Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of basic needs does not make exceptions for boomers.

The problem is that too many of us have been distracted by the stylistic differences in how boomers pursue satisfaction of their needs.

To the extent boomers appear different, it is mainly in how they satisfy their needs, not in what their needs are. This is not a small point. As this Committee deliberates the issues before it, it is important to drill down into basic needs, for is that not what shaping public policy should be about?

None of this is "just" theory. We can only truly understand boomers in their later years if we get beyond all the noise about how boomers are different from everyone else in every other generation.

Boomers may be justifiably called the most misunderstood generation in history. They were the first age group to be labeled and said to have a list of traits that made them different from people in other generations.

Some self-appointed experts in boomer behavior see boomers different because as one said, "Boomers will be teenagers until they die." There are developmentally retarded people in every generation, but most people do pretty well developing beyond their adolescence.

How often do we hear boomers referred to as the "the Me generation?" They acquired this reputation as youth, when being "others centered" is not

the norm for youth. One needs only to reflect on the behavior of youth in ancient Greek plays to realize that the “Me first” ethos has been a mark of youthhood since the beginning of time. More recently, William Shakespeare notably projects the “Me first” ethos of youth in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Like a lady with a scarlet past, boomers are having a hard time living down reputations they forged in their youth. Yes, they *were* “Me first” when young. But now boomers are playing leading roles in a boom in philanthropy. Yes, boomers *once* mightily challenged established ways, but now are among the loudest voices calling for a return to “traditional” values.

Everywhere, people and organizations are trying to figure out aging boomers. They want to know what boomers want as they move into their retirement years. Car companies, healthcare providers, housing developers, travel agents, financial planners and myriad public agencies have made understanding aging boomers a top priority.

The place to begin the pursuit of this understanding is with the commonalities boomers share at comparable ages with other generations those traits that are part of what makes us human.

Interestingly, the term “boomers” was not used to describe those born between 1946 and 1964 until Landon Jones, former managing editor of *People*, coined the term in his 1981 book, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom*. The oldest boomers were then 35. So to a large extent, boomers, as a demographic concept, are a figment of marketers’ imaginations.

Even the influence of boomers on society reflects excessive imagination. For instance, boomers did not lead the charge to change the world during the 1960s. No thought leader of that decade includes a single boomer. Abbie Hoffman, Martin Luther King, Tom Hayden, Bob Dylan, Ralph Nader, Bobby Kennedy, Jane Fonda, Stokely Carmichael, and about a hundred other members of the Silent Generation were the change agents of the 1960s. Boomers did go along for the ride. They expressed

themselves in the same manner that the young in every generation do. They challenged authority to the extent that the previous generation permitted them to do, according to *Seasons of a Man's Life* author, Daniel Levinson, and did so in varying degrees of drama and outlandishness.

I would like to conclude my formal remarks by showing why we can know how boomers will behave in the twilight years of their lives without conducting a single survey.